Reading the Runaways:
Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic

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Run away in July last, from Nicholas Everson, living in East-New-Jersey, two miles from Perth-Amboy ferry, a mulatto Negroe, named Tom, about 37 years of age, short, well-set, thick lips, flat nose, black curled hair, and can play well upon the fiddle: Had on when he went away, a red-colored watch-coat, without a cape, a brown coloured leather jacket, a hat, blue and white twisted yarn leggins; speaks good English, and Low Dutch, and is a good Shoemaker; his said master has been informed that he intends to cut his watchcoat, to make him Indian stockings, and to cut off his hair, and get a blanket, to pass for an Indian; that he enquired for one John and Thomas Nutus, Indians at Susquehanna, and about the Moravians, and the way there. Whoever secures him in the nearest goal or otherwise, so that his master may have him again, shall have Forty Shillings reward, and reasonable charges, paid by

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B ONDSMEN such as Tom are not easily accommodated by traditional understandings of early American history and African-American history. On one hand, his escape is evidence of black agency under the brutal regime of slavery. On the other hand, so much of Tom's story, as told by his chagrined owner in this advertisement for his recapture, creates difficulties for any attempt to isolate and describe a unitary and coherent black (or white, or Native American) historical experience. Whether or not Tom

[1] Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728–1790* (Philadelphia, 1989), 34.

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was a member of an autochthonous slave community or slave culture, he was certainly one of the eighteenth century's quintessential cosmopolitans. He was multilingual, well traveled, skilled in a trade, attuned to the possibilities of life on the margins of settlement, of mixed racial ancestry, and aware enough of appearances to contemplate going—or at least passing as—Native American or Moravian. Historians have rightly used such advertisements to find out as much as possible about who the runaways were, by sex, generation, and occupation. But some of the runaway advertisements also depict slaves pretending to be something else, and, in doing so, becoming something else.[2]

More than chattel, Tom was an actor in the world of goods, manipulating possessions and perceptions to make and remake himself.[3] In fact, Tom had a great deal in common with certain other highly mobile self-fashioners of his day: for example, the appearance-conscious Benjamin Franklin, owner and editor of the newspaper that carried the announcement rewarding Tom's captor; or, perhaps, another Tom—the "famous infamous" Tom Bell, who roamed the colonial seaboard pretending to be various gentlemen of note.[4] This article seeks a new way of seeing some blacks in slavery and servitude: as confidence men. Though Tom might not have been typical among eighteenth-century runaways, his strategies were typical of eighteenth-century confidence men, and perhaps even many more ordinary free men. The runaways described in many advertisements use the assumptions

[2] Ibid.; Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free"*: *Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York, 1994); Lathan Windley, ed., *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*, 4 vols. (Westport, Conn., 1983); Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787* (New York, 1995); Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1966), 101–20; Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972); Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 239–68; Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748–1775* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), 121–36; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens, Ga., 1991), 114–49; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987), chap. 1.

[3] For important insights into North American colonial self-fashioning, including other examples of working peoples' boundary crossing and self-fashioning, see Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997); William B. Hart, "Black 'Go-Betweens' and the Mutability of 'Race,' Status, and Identity on New York's Pre-Revolutionary Frontier," in Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750–1830* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 88–113; Michael Zuckerman, "Tocqueville, Turner, and Turds: Four Stories of Manners in Early America," *Journal of American History*, 85 (1998–1999), 13–42.

[4] Steven C. Bullock, "A Mumper among the Gentle: Tom Bell, Colonial Confidence Man," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 55 (1998), 231–58; *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), July 7, 14, 1743, AUG. 14, 1746. For a runaway servant named John Blowdon who pretended to be a doctor and the son of a rich man, see *Pa. Gaz.*, Mar. 11, 1731, Mar. 8, 1733, reprinted in Daniel Meaders, comp., *Eighteenth-Century White Slaves: Fugitive Notices*, vol. 1, *Pennsylvania, 1729–1760* (Westport, Conn., 1993), 15–16, 32.

of resource-rich whites to get what they want and need. They manipulate goods and texts to their advantage; they capitalize upon the ambiguities in the dominant racial classification system of eighteenth-century America; they employ their knowledge of the developing colonies, and the expanding marketplace in which they themselves were producers, consumers, and commodities, to change their identities and gain at least a measure of freedom.

The advertisements that sought to rein in fugitives show the changing possibilities for black resistance in late-colonial America, especially in those areas like the mid-Atlantic where bound servitude had not yet been racialized. Billy G. Smith's recent work reveals a mid-Atlantic situation in which slaves' individual acts of running away proved to be profoundly destabilizing, even comparable over the long term to the slave rebellions and other collective acts of resistance in the South and the Caribbean. Such seemingly individualistic acts, in turn, reshaped black life in the North and put enormous pressure on the slave system elsewhere. Not only did African Americans form the bedrock of several New World colonies, they also moved between all parts of early America, making—and occasionally profiting from—the connections between areas of relative settlement and unsettlement, between slave societies and societies with slaves and other unfree laborers. In different generations and in different places throughout eighteenth-century North America, a skilled, experienced, creolized population of working people— black, white, and racially mixed—bridged the seemingly separate, but economically linked, communities that made up the Atlantic world.[5]

Any effort to appreciate the nature and impact of unfree mobility, however, needs to be specific to region and to time. The mid-Atlantic colonies have been seen as the seedbed of American ethnic and religious diversity and the liberal "pursuits of happiness." The region may also prove to be where slaves and servants found some of the best ways to resist that emerging capitalist consensus from within its own structures as well as to develop alternatives such as religious practices. If the Middle Colonies were a particularly important and pathbreaking hub of development, with increasing slave importation, immigration, and trade, they were also a middle ground between North and South, and sometimes between the growing coastal cities and an expanding countryside: places perhaps especially open to "creative adaptations" whose meanings have yet to be fully discerned.[6]

[5] Billy G. Smith, "Runaway Slaves in the Mid-Atlantic Region during the Revolutionary Era," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement* (Charlottesville, Va., 1995), 199–230; Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, La., 1979); Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J., 1991); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York, 1997); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); and works cited below in note 7.

[6] Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988); John J. McCusker and

The advertisements also exemplify certain extralocal aspects of eighteenth-century mainland culture and, in doing so, hint at the magnitude of the project of racialization that whites began in earnest during the late-colonial period. This project, inchoate and partial during the era discussed here, proved attractive precisely because of the success the unfree had in putting their extralocal knowledge to use. The scholarly literature on cosmopolitanism, the public sphere, and the rise of intercolonial networks has largely ignored slaves and ordinary people such as Tom, but slaves and other working people created a vernacular cosmopolitanism that served runaways especially well. Drawing on new understandings of the "black Atlantic" and the "picaresque proletariat" created by merchant capitalism and by the people of European and African descent who performed merchant capital's highly mobile labor, it is possible to speak of a more mainland vernacular cosmopolitanism, a racially mixed alternative public that becomes especially visible in the advertisements. What would that alternative public imply for the republican public sphere, epitomized by Benjamin Franklin and his enterprising use of print, upon which the runaway advertisements so rudely (or, rather, profitably) intrude?[7]

Such intrusions were in fact a regular aspect of the public sphere of late-colonial America. To late-twentieth-century eyes passing over the columns of an eighteenth-century newspaper, the advertisements can seem surprising, even outrageous, a rude reminder of forms of unfreedom that were doomed. They may then be separated from the other aspects of colonial life the newspapers make visible: the republic of letters, political protest, the world of

Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), chap. 9; White, *Somewhat More Independent;* Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665–1865* (Madison, Wis., 1997); Wayne Bodle, "Themes and Directions in Middle Colonies Historiography, 1980–1994," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., 51 (1994), 355–88; T. H. Breen, "Creative Adaptations: Peoples and Cultures," in J. R. Pole and Jack P. Greene, eds., *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, 1984), 195–232.

[7] Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Marcus Rediker, "Good Hands, Stout Heart, and Fast Feet: The History and Culture of Working People in Early America," in Geoff Eley and William Hunt, eds., *Reviving the English Revolution: Reflections and Elaborations on the Work of Christopher Hill* (London, 1988), 236; Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (New York, 1987); Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1991), 119–52, 169–70; Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., 53 (1996), 251–88; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997). On "counterpublic spheres" of working peoples, see Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," and Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 109–42, 289–339. For Franklin as the epitome of the republican public sphere, see Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 73–96; Larzer Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (New Haven, Conn., 1991), 83–106.

goods. But what if the advertisements for runaways are considered as consti-
tutive of the multiracial, free and unfree social world that the newspapers
not only represented but, increasingly, mediated? We know about runaways
precisely because notices for them appeared in newspapers, and the circula-
tion of newspapers was itself inseparable from the expansion of internal and
imperial trade in the mid-eighteenth century. Yet scholars have not
attempted to think about the slave advertisements themselves as a print
genre and as an essential part of the newspapers they helped subsidize.

This article uses runaway advertisements to analyze the acts of cultural
hybridization black and racially mixed people committed for their own pur-
poses and then proceeds to evaluate the owners' use of print to counter the
mobility of the unfree, to establish or reestablish confidence in slavery and
servitude. Benjamin Franklin and the print culture he represents had far
more to do with slavery than previously believed, and all the more so
because mid-Atlantic runaways insisted, as Franklin had insisted, on using
their connections, their knowledge of the world of goods, and their linguistic
skills to change their condition. Their awareness of how the system worked
cannot be separated from the knowledge and skills that made them such
valuable commodities in the first place, as the case of Charles Roberts, a
mulatto servant, printer, and runaway, will demonstrate. The knowledge and
will exercised by literate runaways like Roberts made it all the more tempt-
ing for the architects of the public sphere, such as Franklin and John Holt
(Roberts's owner), to find ways to deny the social importance of unfree, and
especially black unfree, labor. During the late eighteenth century, the project
of racializing differences in status and denying the realities of racial mixture
came to be most attractive to people like Franklin and Holt, at least in part
because runaways were capitalizing on their knowledge of social differences,
of people and places, as assiduously as a successful printer and as craftily as
the best confidence man.

It is impossible to know how many slaves and servants engaged in acts
of disguise and self-transformation, because the main archive for that knowl-
edge is the advertisements themselves. Though the notices advertise these
very propensities, the authors had no small interest in denying the very tal-
ents that had otherwise proven valuable to them. The advertisements empha-
size certain attributes and fail to discover others. Realistic in intent, they are
also rhetorical to the core. Runaway advertisements, in effect, were the first
slave narratives—the first published stories about slaves and their seizure of
freedom. They differ from the later counternarratives of ex-slaves and aboli-
tionists in that the advertisements attempted to use print to bolster confi-
dence in slavery, rather than confidence in African Americans and their
allies. Written by the master class, they not only reveal but also exemplify
the profitable contradictions of the mid-Atlantic labor system.

In what sense can slaves and servants—people with the most ascribed
identities—have meaningfully fashioned their own selves? Classic and recent
work on race in the nineteenth century has stressed the theatricality of the

master-slave relationship, in which both masters and slaves played public roles that might not have been fully internalized; or, if they were taken to heart, it was as roles, and not necessarily as unidimensional or transparent facts of life. Black identities, like most identities in multiracial, multicultural America, were often made in interactions with the other, where whites and blacks tried out poses and, surprisingly often, played and imitated each other.[8]

Runaway advertisements offer a particularly useful entry into this role-playing because they necessarily attempt to describe individuals for their conformity to certain expected appearances or their equally generic alleged failure to perform certain roles. The act of running away itself challenged such roles even as it was expected of some bondsmen, and the authors of advertisements often found themselves explaining, directly or by implication, this failure of slavery and servitude as a cultural system (often by casting it as an ultimate success through the master's lack of surprise at the flight and his expectation of recapturing the fugitive). Roles, of course, are only part of reality, and the runaway notices are particularly interesting because they reveal slaves' capitalizing on the expectations of masters by contravening their roles, and the masters in turn explaining (literally, rewriting) their expectations to make room for the tendency of the unfree to run. To get slaves or servants back into the role—to have them captured and returned, like the property they were, rather than the self-motivated persons they also were—owners had to describe what the slaves or servants had done to escape their role and what attributes (positive, negative, or both in their view) they possessed that might or might not help them "pretend to be free."

Four of these attributes stand out in the advertisements: clothing, trades or skills, linguistic ability or usage, and ethnic or racial identity. The first three were the stock-in-trade of the eighteenth-century confidence man, whose manipulation of clothes, language, and the signs of trade or skill—

    [8] Gilbert Osofsky, "Introduction," *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northrup* (New York, 1969), 9–44; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York, 1992); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, 1991), 59–97; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993). For recent analyses that do apply a constructionist or performative understanding of racial identity to the earlier period, with varying psychological and political emphases, see Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741–1834," *JAH,* 81 (1994–1995), 13–50; Wilson J. Moses, "Sex, Salem, and Slave Trials: Ritual Drama and Ceremony of Innocence," in Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich, eds., *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 64–76; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996); T. H. Breen, "Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Massachusetts," Mechal Sobel, "The Revolution in Selves: Black and White Inner Aliens," and W. Jeffrey Bolster, "An Inner Diaspora: Black Sailors Making Selves," in Hoffman, Sobel, and Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly,* 67–95, 163–205, 419–48.

three main indicators of social status among men—made him a particularly disturbing sort of criminal. An expanding hierarchical world that could no longer depend upon intimate knowledge of all persons and their identities— the British, the colonial, the Atlantic world—was increasingly open to such ruses. In England, new literary genres had already emerged to narrate and comment on men and women on the make.[9] Yet the art of playing on the confidence of strangers in the markers of identity would seem logically to have been more accessible to the free than to the unfree. Why were so many eighteenth-century slaves and servants successful in their efforts at least temporarily to change their status by changing appearances—so successful that the brief notices taken out by masters became a regular feature of newspapers, and now fill volumes? The proliferation of these social types (both the runaway and the confidence man) need to be placed in the context of the expanding market of mid-eighteenth-century provincial America and the trade in laborers, as well as goods, that characterized this consumer revolution.

A burgeoning literature describes and analyzes the explosion of material goods on the American scene and the further integration in the British empire of goods that consumption signified for colonists. The port cities of the mid-Atlantic grew rapidly because of this trade. It is less often observed in this scholarship, however, that the consumer revolution entailed, if it did not create, the huge demand for labor that was filled by immigrant and convict indentured servants from the margins of the newly named "Great Britain" and by slaves from Africa, the West Indies, and the other mainland colonies. The 1740s—the key decade for American integration into the British consumer economy—was also the beginning of an increase in the importation and resale of unfree labor, white and black, in the mid-Atlantic. This proliferation of people-commodities—of laborers as goods—is reflected in the number of advertisements for goods, for the sale of servants and slaves, and for the recapture of runaways in the newspapers, all of which rose in tandem and rapidly during the 1730s and especially the 1740s (see Table I).[10]

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[9] J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York, 1990); Christopher Hill, *Liberty against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (London, 1996). For a mid-Atlantic example, see William Moraley, *The Infortunate: The Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley, an Indentured Servant* (1743), ed. Susan E. Klepp and Billy G. Smith (University Park, Pa., 1992).

[10] Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, Va., 1994); Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992); T. H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690–1776," *Journal of British Studies,* 25 (1986), 467–99; Breen, "'Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present,* no. 119 (May 1988), 73–104; Breen, "Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., 50 (1993), 471–501; James G. Lydon, "New York and the Slave Trade, 1700 to 1774," ibid., 35 (1978), 375–94; Darold D. Wax, "The Demand for Slave Labor in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History,* 34 (1967), 331–45; James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York, 1981), 385–418; Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, N.J., 1985), 54–86; A. J. Williams-Myers, "Hands That Picked No Cotton: An Exploratory Examination of African Slave Labor in the Colonial

TABLE I
ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE *PENNSYLVANIA GAZETTE,* 1729–1755

Years	Average per Issue	No. (%) for Unfree Labor	No. for Selling Slaves	No. for Selling Servants	No. for Runaway Slaves	No. for Runaway Servants
1729–1730	6.7	1.71 (25.5)	.13	.13	.17	1.29
1731–1732	8.8	2.33 (26.5)	.29	.29	.04	1.70
1733–1734	9.0	1.96 (21.7)	.42	.33	.04	1.17
1735–1736	14.1	2.54 (18.0)	.48	.56	0	1.50
1737–1738	18.1	4.75 (26.3)	.92	.71	.17	2.96
1739–1740	20.8	4.71 (22.7)	.54	.54	.21	3.42
1741–1742	25.3	5.79 (22.9)	1.25	.92	.21	3.42
1743–1744	28.0	6.88 (24.6)	1.29	.54	.38	4.67
1745–1746	32.3	8.29 (25.7)	1.29	.71	.88	5.41
1747–1748	45.8	10.33 (22.5)	2.02	1.02	.92	6.38
1749–1750	59.1	11.79 (19.9)	2.29	1.08	.94	7.48
1751–1752	82.8	15.71 (19.0)	3.31	2.06	.77	9.56
1753–1754	83.3	16.21 (19.5)	2.79	2.08	.29	11.04
1755	94.3	18.92 (20.1)	2.42	3.33	1.17	12.00

Note: Calculations are based on an examination of the first issue of the newspaper for each month. The category of servants includes African Americans and racially mixed people. By the mid-1750s, many of the advertisements were published on an extra half-sheet; these were not always included in the microfilm and original copies at Yale University and in the William Smith Mason collection of the Benjamin Franklin Papers, Yale University, especially after 1756. By 1758, the number of advertisements decreased rapidly to the late-1740s level of about 45 per issue owing to the Seven Years' War and its short-term effect on overseas trade and because Franklin and Hall stopped publishing the extra half-sheet. Advertisements took up an increasing amount of space in the paper overall, especially after 1748, though this stabilized after 1752; see Charles E. Clark and Charles Wetherell, "The Measure of Maturity: The *Pennsylvania Gazette,* 1728–1765," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., 46 (1989), 288–90.

Increasing trade on the water and in the interior also translated into a trade in servants and slaves, as these human goods began to move about with the goods they made, finished, transported, and helped show off in the enlarged homes of the genteel. If, as T. H. Breen suggests, "the roads of eighteenth-century America carried peddlers, itinerants and soldiers, all representatives of an increasingly fluid society," servants and slaves—native born and foreign born—also epitomize this fluidity: their flexibly employed

Economy of the Hudson River Valley to 1800," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History,* 11 (1987), 25–51; Thelma Wills Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan, 1664-1786" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1991), 23, 41–52; Sharon V. Salinger, *"To Serve Well and Faithfully": Labor and Indentured Servants in Pennsylvania, 1682–1800* (New York, 1987) 47–81; Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York, 1991), 3–40; Smith, "Runaway Slaves in the Mid-Atlantic Region."

muscle and skill made it all possible. Graham R. Hodges finds that in rural Monmouth County, New Jersey, "slaves traveled most often to pick up commodities for their masters at general stores" and had explicit privileges to buy and sell. When the oft-quoted Dr. Alexander Hamilton made his tour of points north of Maryland, writing in his *Itinerarium* of the pretenses to gentility he saw all about, he did so with his slave beside him. It was Dromo carrying the baggage into Newport, not his genteel master, who was mistaken for a peddler.[11]

What Breen calls "the creative possibilities of possession" had a double meaning for the unfree. The exploitation they experienced was heightened by the new possibilities for rapid profit seized upon by many of their owners. Pennsylvanians treated slaves and servants as "interchangeable labor forces," to be bought and sold, for cash or credit, as profit dictated—and it dictated often. In towns and cities, slaves were leased for short periods or sent out to hire themselves and earn wages. In rural areas like Long Island, and other places with close overland or waterborne links to cities, there developed a "highly mobile and multi-occupational African workforce accustomed to little immediate supervision."[12] This workforce was multiracial—white, black, and mixed-blood, foreign, creole, and native—as well as free, indentured, and slave. Comparing this flexible form of slavery and servitude to the plantation slavery gaining strength to the south, historians have seen in these developments only the beginnings of the end of slavery, rather than a newly intensified, capitalist, mixed system of unfree labor in which the presence of both servants and slaves depressed the prices of both and helped solve the problem of high wages for freemen.[13] In a sense, commercialization worked

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[11] T. H. Breen, "The Meaning of Things: Interpreting the Consumer Economy in the Eighteenth Century," in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York, 1993), 251; Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North,* 55–57; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone,* 56–57; Carl Bridenbaugh, ed., *Gentleman's Progress: The Itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744* (1948; reprint, Pittsburgh, 1992), 150.

On indentured servants, see, especially, Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (1946; reprint, New York, 1965), 310–531; Salinger, *"To Serve Well and Faithfully"*; Daniel E. Meaders, "Fugitive Slaves and Indentured Servants before 1800" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990); Aaron S. Fogelman, "From Slaves, Convicts, and Servants to Free Passengers: The Transformation of Immigration in the Era of the American Revolution," *JAH,* 85 (1998–1999), 43–59; Marilyn C. Baseler, *"Asylum for Mankind": America, 1607–1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 6–7, 70–119. Meaders provocatively titles his recent collection of runaway advertisements for indentured servants *Eighteenth-Century White Slaves.*

[12] Breen, "The Meaning of Things," 251; Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1973), 13–14, 47–51; Salinger, *"To Serve Well and Faithfully,"* 81; Richard Shannon Moss, *Slavery on Long Island: A Study in Local Institutional and Early African-American Communal Life* (New York, 1993), 97.

[13] O. Nigel Bolland, "Proto-Proletarians? Slave Wages in the Americas," in Mary Turner, ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (London, 1995), 123–47; Baseler, *"Asylum for Mankind."* The relative preponderance of servants or slaves, and the choices masters made when they had choices, seem less important here than the similar conditions that underlay the expanded acquisition and use of both servants and slaves and the ensuing multiracial character of the servant class, which is too often assumed to have been white. But for a different view that stresses the decline of slavery, see Richard S. Dunn, "Servants and Slaves: The Recruitment and Employment of Labor," in Greene and Pole, eds., *Colonial British America,* 180–83.

for servants and slaves the way it ultimately did for the free: it created new structures of movement and action—real freedom—yet it could also intensify traditional sources of constraint and nascent networks of debt. It should be no surprise that merchant capitalism, and the Anglicization it brought, strengthened slavery and servitude, for both were things of empire adapted to local conditions, like teapots and tax men.[14]

Clothing was perhaps the most important of the trade goods that proliferated in the colonies, and it proved as crucial a matter for the runaways as for genteel men and women. By the early 1730s, colonial spokesmen were arguing that their purchases of clothing made in England, and their resale of such goods to the Indians and the West Indies, made crucial contributions to the imperial economy.[15] As the most necessary, transportable, and resalable of commodities, articles of attire came to support a burgeoning resale market in the colonies. Clothing also illustrates the contemporaneous movement of an emulative consumer desire down from the top of society and the emergence of vernacular styles at the bottom. Insofar as average Americans participated in new forms of self-making—in the mode of gentility or otherwise—clothing informed the process. Benjamin Franklin dressed up to be a gentleman in the 1740s and 1750s and dressed down to show his virtuous republicanism after he arrived in France as the agent for America. As Steven C. Bullock has shown, the celebrated confidence man Tom Bell succeeded again and again in pretending to be a gentleman in part because of his fine clothing, and he took all opportunities to capitalize upon the trust his clothes gained him in order to steal more clothes. Because of the household nature of much slave labor in the eighteenth-century North, slaves had ample opportunity to take the clothes they washed from the owners they dressed.[16]

Advertisements for runaways describe their clothing in great detail: since few people had an extensive wardrobe, describing the clothes was as good as describing the man or woman. All the more reason that slaves and servants took every opportunity to take their own clothes when they absconded,

[14] Some historians have shown more interest in giving capitalism the credit for antislavery than in untangling its complex, variable relationship to slavery (not to mention race) in the first place. See, especially, Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," in Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 107–60. Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), serves as a useful corrective, as does Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (London, 1997), esp. 6–13, 351–55.

[15] *Pa. Gaz.,* Dec. 29, 1730, Jan. 5, July 15, 1731. The latter piece excerpts Joshua Gee, *The Trade and Navigation of Great Britain Considered . . .* (London, 1729).

[16] For the importance of clothes, see Jonathan Prude, "To Look upon the 'Lower Sort': Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750–1800," *JAH,* 78 (1991–1992), 124–60; Beverly Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes and Popular Consumerism in Early Modern England," *Journal of Social History,* 24 (1990–1991), 255–76; Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Past and Present,* no. 148 (August 1995), 149–87; Bullock, "Tom Bell, Colonial Confidence Man."

along with those of their masters and mistresses. Sometimes different or finer clothes increased the chances of passing for free or being unrecognized. Hannah, described as "of an Olive Colour," ran with mourning attire, "which she no doubt intends to Dress in, that she may not be known." In 1763, many mulattoes dressed in altered French or English military uniforms, no doubt recently earned in service or taken from deceased or deserted soldiers—another way in which the lives and possessions of slaves, servants, and the not-quite-free overlapped materially as well as personally. In concert with white servants, runaway slaves robbed a Carlisle, Pennsylvania, tailor's shop; in Joppa, Maryland, another group broke into a tailor's shop and a dry goods store. When Jack ran away from Edward Agar, he risked coming back for a change of attire. Some took for use, for resale value, and, perhaps, for spite all at once, such as George Marple's slave George, who went out of his way to filch "another check shirt, and two Silk Handkerchiefs."[17]

For all its specificity, clothing could mean different things. The most successful runaways, like confidence men, probably changed their styles as often as they altered their stories, depending on the audience. For a servant like Charles Roberts, who according to his infuriated owner "effects to dress very neat and genteel" (and about whom more later), plainer attire might have been the better disguise, especially after his owner, a printer, placed a lengthy notice about him in New York and Philadelphia newspapers. Good clothes were as suspect as poor "negro shoes" (worn, revealingly, by white servants as well as slaves). A New Brunswick, New Jersey, jailer placed an advertisement notifying the public that he had incarcerated two blacks in fine clothing; the imprisoned men said they belonged to a West Indian gentleman who had died soon after they arrived in New York City. But did the clothes indicate that they were telling the truth or that they had committed some crime against their owner (dead or alive) or against some heirs by running away? The jailer advertised in a New York paper for their master or master's heirs to come forward, or for testimony of their freedom, a much less likely proposition.[18]

Masters hoped to get both the clothes and the slaves back, and the rhetoric of the advertisements at times suggests that the most significant difference between the two was their monetary value. The owners' representations of runaways' clothes (including clothes they stole) sought to return these items and the runaways themselves back to the controllable world of goods in response to the attempts of servants and slaves to use clothes to refashion their identities. Often masters accomplished their aim by claiming property in the clothes as personally as in the slave. Writers of advertisements occasionally advised would-be captors to look for the monograms in shirts or on buttons. Such detailed renderings as "an ozenbrigs shirt and trowsers, with a new linsey woolsey blue jacket, a felt hatt, good shoes with

[17] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 34, 110, 113, 115, 121, 124; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 105, 111, 133.

[18] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 91–92, 149–50; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 15, 34.

brass buckles . . . a new broadcloth jacket of a lightish colour and a fine hol-
land check'd shirt and trowsers, and a fine white shirt and two cambrick cra-
vats and a pair of blewish white stockings" (the former ensemble worn, the
latter lifted) placed the absconded persons in the same category as the
lengthy lists of such goods that merchants advertised in adjacent newspaper
columns.[19] In a sense, the owners were truly advertising their own clothes,
even if worn by their slaves: the clothes and the laborers had both been
stolen, and they both returned to the pages of the newspaper, where both
might first have been offered to the public for sale.

If clothing, like the runaways who wore them, proved both mutable and
objectifiable, surely hairstyle and texture identified the racially and ethni-
cally marked fugitive. Insofar as race meant a group of somatic characteris-
tics, white owners up and down the East Coast described woolly hair as a
distinctly African trait. Yet as Shane White and Graham White observe in
their recent history of black style, runaway advertisements depict a great
variety of hairstyles among slaves, "an expressive space that blacks were able
to exploit." Distinctive hair could be shaven or grown, and frustrated mas-
ters struggled to represent verbally the texture of the hair on the heads of
mulattoes and mustees—when they wore "their own Hair" at all. In the
early-eighteenth-century cities, blacks had already learned the trade of wig-
dressing, which they employed on themselves as well as on whites of differ-
ent classes. "Old" or secondhand wigs circulated as clothes did, and their
theft was also noted in advertisements. The ability to change one's hairstyle
aided flight: those who looked for fugitives were not greatly helped by
notices describing a slave who "sometimes wears a wig."[20]

For runaways, wig-dressing worked in tandem with the other important
trades and useful skills they practiced, skills that made them valuable and
increased their chances for temporary or permanent escape. One Kent
County, Maryland, mulatto had "worked some Time in a Mill, in a Tan-
Yard, and on a Plantation." A Virginia slave advertised in Pennsylvania
could "turn his hand to many sorts of trades, and particularly that of a
Carpenter." Often masters only reluctantly admitted that their fugitives
filled the ranks of the skilled. Disinclined to grant servants and slaves the
status of artisans, even though they constituted many of those working in
the trades, they preferred to insist that a slave would "pass for a currier,"
"pretends to be a Tanner," "pretends to be a Black-Smith," "professes to be a
Barber, Cook and Sailor."[21]

[19] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 36.
[20] Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its
Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 61; *Pa. Gaz.,* Mar. 1, 1748; Hodges and Brown,
eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 21–22, 27, 74, 272; *New-York Weekly Journal,* Aug. 26, 1734; Smith
and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 21, 23, 76.
[21] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 56–57, 294; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds.,
Blacks Who Stole Themselves, 114; *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), Sept. 6, 1749, Mar. 14, 1750;
Clement Price, ed., *Freedom Not Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro-Americans in New
Jersey* (Newark, N.J., 1980), 40–42. For slaves and servants employed by artisans, see White,
Somewhat More Independent, 10–22; Tina H. Sheller, "Freemen, Servants, and Slaves: Artisans
and the Class Structure of the Revolutionary Baltimore Town," in Howard B. Rock, Paul A.

Even when such skills and aspirations were admitted, they could be disparaged, as with Simon, who "talks good *English,* can read and write, is very slow in his Speech, can bleed and draw Teeth, Pretending to be a great Doctor and very religious and says he is a Churchman." Tom Bell and Stephen Burroughs, the best-known confidence men of the era, pretended to gentility; the unfree most often pretended to the free identity that came with a trade—while sometimes, like Simon or "Preaching Dick," developing less common skills on the side. Those who owned the labor of runaways would have none of it and registered their protest in the rhetoric of pretense that suffuses the advertisements. The accusations of false piety are especially revealing as adjuncts to the attempt to strip the runaways of their hard work and skill, their respectability and success as self-made men and women. Christianity, after all, was a source of strength and self-determination, its possession often itself an argument for equality in the eyes of slaves and their allies. Advertising his "very talkative" thirty-five-year-old slave, one master insisted on using the language of pretense to describe how his slave Anthony "pretends to be a preacher," even while admitting that Anthony "sometimes officiates in that capacity among the Blacks."[22]

Owners made similar complaints about indentured servants. To a large extent, slaves who ran to practice a trade mirrored the efforts of runaway apprentices and servants to escape a system that attempted to squeeze profit out of scarce labor. Just as people who worked with their hands had to prove their value in public demonstrations, such as the show of diligence Benjamin Franklin made with his wheelbarrow in the streets of Philadelphia, every aspiring person was engaged in an effort of persuasion. To play in this consequential game was, for working people, to pursue freedom. When masters and others denied those skills in public, labeling them false, they sought to turn the labor of these people into a still cheaper commodity. For owners as for bondsmen, a relationship existed between pretending to own a trade and pretending to be free, as in the very syntax of the advertisement that William Wood placed in 1777: "He passes himself for a free man and a glasier by trade."[23] A glazier was not usually a commodity in the same way that an unfree man was, so an unfree glazier could not simply be spoken of as a glazier. Someone else owned his trade.

Gilje, and Robert Asher, eds., *American Artisans: Crafting Social Identity, 1750–1850* (Baltimore, 1995), 25–29.

[22] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 16, 297; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 26, 124; *Pa. Gaz.,* Sept. 11, 1740, Nov. 2, 1749. On Stephen Burroughs, see Burroughs, *The Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs,* ed. Philip F. Gura (Boston, 1988); Robert A. Gross, "The Confidence Man and the Preacher: The Cultural Politics of Shays's Rebellion," in Gross, ed., *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion* (Charlottesville, Va., 1993), 297–321. On religion and slavery in the mid-Atlantic, see Graham R. Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, N.C., forthcoming).

[23] W. J. Rohrabuagh, "'I Thought I Should Liberate Myself from the Thraldom of Others': Apprentices, Masters, and the Revolution," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1993), 185–217; Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 196.

Commodification was apparent in the growing tendency of slaveowners, rural and urban, to buy, sell, and rent slaves as "short-term speculation," a tendency that led to more running away, as slaves took their chances with prior masters, with new acquaintances, or on their own. Merchant capitalism heightened the commodification of all labor. For servants and especially slaves, the local, freelance jail system in the colonies, like Newgate in the metropolis and impressment on the high seas, acted as an important adjunct to this process of commodification, as jailers too placed advertisements for runaways they had "taken up" and would release for their "charges." The interests of masters who owned runaways sometimes clashed with an arguably greater public interest in having a flexible, skilled, and increasingly mobile labor force. As long as labor was cheap, many farmers and master artisans did not care whether it was bound or free, white or black, or some ambiguous combination of all these. It is generally assumed that this situation led to the decline of slavery and indentured servitude in the long run. The contradictions or stresses in such a system might have made it precarious, and the Revolution certainly sped its mutation into something else. But such developments were not inevitable, and certainly not intentional, for, in the meantime, the combination of harsh laws and variable enforcement kept the owning classes in good profits. It was an open secret that many harbored runaways to profit from their cheap labor: a system that allowed for maximum exploitation by the master class and a choice of workplace for some of the unfree.[24]

Before the Revolution, seafaring ranked among the best prospects for fugitives in search of both a quick getaway and an employer who would not ask too many questions. Slaves and servants ran to ships with regularity, and the advertisements reveal the lure of the sea and the aspiration of many to the life of a mariner. Consequently, advertisements regularly warned "masters of vessels" against granting a berth to particular persons. But they also warned people on land against harboring fugitives, especially in the wake of the wartime disorders that allowed so many to escape. Common ruses for those escaping by land included pretending to be another man's servant, to be en route on an errand, or to be looking for employment (as some surely were, but without permission). After mentioning the locations of his slave Peg's two former owners, Eleazar Oswald wrote in exasperation to the *New Jersey Journal:* "It is presumed she is gone to Chatham in New Jersey, or else

[24] Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 69, 72, 75, 78, 86–87; Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 96, 98, 115, 149; McManus, *History of Negro Slavery in New York,* 47–53; Frances D. Pingeon, "Slavery in New Jersey on the Eve of Revolution," in William C. Wright, ed., *New Jersey in the American Revolution,* rev. ed. (Trenton, N.J., 1974), 58. For the commodification of labor, see Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.* On regulation and incarceration in England, see Linebaugh, *The London Hanged;* Nicholas Rogers, "Vagrancy, Impressment, and the Regulation of Labor in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Slavery and Abolition,* 15 (1994), 102–13. Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the essence of capitalism is its "commodification of everything," pointing especially to the commodification of labor and of the subprocesses in the supply of necessities such as clothing; see Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism; with Capitalist Civilization,* 2d ed. (London, 1995), 16.

is concealed in this city [Philadelphia], or some place near it, by some free negroes or others, who wish to avail themselves of the service of other people's servants." As today, trade wars and real wars uprooted people and encouraged the creation of an informal economy in which official rules of migration and employment do not obtain because employees and (especially) employers benefit more by ignoring them. The frustrated master Oswald threatened to sue as well as prosecute those who aided his runaway. The same conditions that made slaves increasingly valuable also created opportunities for them, and headaches for their masters.[25]

How, after all, could one really tell who was a slave, who a freeman, who a servant, and who a runaway? A vague and roughly accurate common sense forecast that the African born were likely to be slaves, that mulattoes and "country-born" people of color were more likely than Africans to be servants or free, and that recently arrived Irish, Scots, and Welshmen were probably servants. Yet precisely because the markers of clothing and skill were themselves commodified, and because runaways expertly played the market, these ethnic markers, though relied upon, were often unreliable as guides to the status of persons. So was race, if race means skin color. The culturalist and nationalist understandings of difference preferred today were more commonly used in the runaway advertisements than those of biological race, although attempts to describe color also appeared regularly. Indeed, the greatly variable terms for the "tawny," "swarthy," "dark," "brown," or even "black" complexion of some foreign-born whites suggests that, despite the continued link of blackness (and often Indianness) to slavery and servitude, whiteness in its modern form—associated with freedom, guaranteed to all those of European descent—did not yet exist in the mid-Atlantic. Instead, as in late-seventeenth-century Virginia, a picaresque, occasionally criminalized class arose for whom race did not matter in the same ways, or as consistently, as it would come to matter.[26]

Masters often saw color where we see white because of their desire to identify unfree laborers as phenotypically different. At the same time, skilled and cosmopolitan slaves and servants, according to both contemporary impressions and the advertisements taken en masse, were often racially mixed or creole, further complicating any prospective attempt to rely on race-as-

[25] Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 18–19, 35, 148–49; Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 19, 95, 109–10, 274–75, 294; *Pa. Gaz.,* May 4, 1749; Bolster, *Black Jacks,* 7–43; McManus, *Black Bondage in the North,* 47–50, 114. For a vivid sense of the variable benefits of informal economies, see Sarah Mahler, *American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins* (Princeton, N.J., 1995).

[26] *Pa. Gaz.,* Oct. 28, 1734, Apr. 1, 1747, Feb. 14, Apr. 13, July 6, 1749, Nov. 7, 1751, Oct. 5, 1752; Meaders, comp., *Eighteenth-Century White Slaves,* 77, 104; Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples,* 2d ed. (Urbana, Ill., 1993), 4–5, 66; Prude, "To Look upon the 'Lower Sort,'" 151; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom.* On stages of racial perception in U.S. history after 1790, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

skin-color to determine status in the last instance. Color indicated a likeli-
hood of servitude, but it was no guarantee of slavery. Later, the decline of
indentured servitude and slavery catalyzed by the upheavals of the American
Revolution would initiate a re-racialization of blacks of various hues even as
it freed many of them. Despite the large numbers of free blacks in the North
by 1790 and the emancipation measures undertaken in a number of states by
that time, the post-Revolutionary North became more like the contemporary
South in the matter of racial classification, because blacks constituted the
only group largely and permanently subject to adult unfree labor. In such a
situation, the incentives for racism along a white-black binary would be even
greater.[27]

Undeniably, brown and black skin color remained associated with slav-
ery and servitude all over the Atlantic world during the eighteenth century.
Yet color did not resolve the problem of mulattoes, of servants versus slaves,
or of free blacks. Although the fundamental mark of race in America has
been skin color, argues the philosopher Robert John Ackermann, the history
of race as a form of perception shows that the mark of race "can be almost
anything": indeed, racism "typically drifts away from skin color to personal-
ity characteristics and genetic claims."[28] During the late eighteenth and
nineteenth century, northerners and southerners would develop a racism that
insisted upon inherent, natal black inferiority and cultural difference. In
print culture, as in popular theater, that difference and inferiority was
demonstrated through a white insistence upon the ubiquity of Black English
dialect. In linguistic forms, Black English embodied difference as inequality
when whites considered or performed it as a second-rate, incomplete,
uncomprehending dialect, lacking the expressive possibilities now celebrated
in actual African-American English. White Americans found in culture—in
language turned into performance and print—something they could not
always depend upon in biology.[29]

[27] Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital,* 403, 411; Duncan J. MacLeod,
"Toward Caste," in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the
American Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va., 1983), 217–36; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone,* 228–55,
358–65.

[28] Robert John Ackermann, *Heterogeneities: Race, Gender, Class, Nation, and State*
(Amherst, Mass., 1996), 21, 29. See also Walter Benn Michaels, "Autobiography of an Ex-white
Man," *Transition,* 73 (1998), 122–43. For the particular importance of the Revolutionary era in
the history of slavery and racism, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes
toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 269–582; David Brion Davis, *The Problem
of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975); Gary B. Nash, *Race and
Revolution* (Madison, 1990); Frey, *Water from the Rock;* Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone,* 219–357.
The runaway advertisements generally support Jordan's claim that the miscegenation that had
already occurred was the greatest threat to racial hierarchy—a point that need not depend on
Jordan's psychosexual emphasis; see *White over Black,* 136–78, 542–69.

[29] Lott, *Love and Theft;* Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the
Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 19–58; W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain:
Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); David Grimsted,
"Anglo-American Racism and Phyllis Wheatley's 'Sable Veil,' 'Length'ned Chain,' and 'Knitted
Heart,'" in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American
Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va., 1989), 338–446; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words,*

Before the late eighteenth century, however, it was much harder to establish a useful fiction of linguistic homogeneity in the black—or white—colonial population. Dialect jokes were directed at all the foreign accents that could be heard among the diverse peoples of early America. Advertisers for runaways commented on language proficiency and accents, or lack thereof, without ascribing a racial essence to bondsmen's linguistic abilities. Indeed, the advertisements were at least as likely to comment pejoratively on an Irish servant's "brogue on the tongue" or indicate surprised pleasure at a Welshman's "good English" as to express irritation at a colored person's Black English. Like trades and clothes, language ability was a matter of value on the open market, to be judged by consumers who knew how to make valuable distinctions based on their own needs. There were "French negroes," "Spanish negroes," "country-born" English-speakers fluent in Dutch or German, and West Indian–born slaves who knew the pidgins of trade as well as distinct local languages; these multilingual slaves were the glue of maritime commerce, of a diverse America growing because of its trade with the world. A healthy colonial world in the age of merchant capital was a multilingual world in which people of mixed background were valued precisely for such skills. Language was a matter of nationality and culture, and nations and cultures were mixing in war and peace.[30]

Mid-Atlantic masters seem to have been less ambivalent about slaves' language skills than masters in the South. Generally, masters valued their slaves' and servants' multilingualism, as long as their English was fluent, and thought it a problem only if they had run away. Yet those who spoke multiple languages or dialects or could write had the most success running away. Recent arrivals who knew little English were often supposed to have been

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Signs, and the "Racial" Self (New York, 1987), 3–79; White, *Somewhat More Independent*, 73; John Wood Sweet, "Bodies Politic: Colonialism, Race, and the Emergence of the American North: Rhode Island, 1730–1830" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1995), chap. 6; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997), 209–10, 229–31, 333–42.

[30] Bolster, *Black Jacks,* 40–41; Berlin, "From African to Creole"; *Pa. Gaz.,* Feb. 10, 1744, Jan. 24, 1749, Nov. 1, 1753; *New-York Gazette,* Feb. 1, 1768; *New-York Mercury,* Sept. 2, 1754; *N.-Y. Weekly Jour.,* May 16, 1737; *New-York Gazette [Weyman's],* July 4, 1761; Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 94, 123–24, 146–47. For the emergence of standard Black and white English and its significance, see J. L. Dillard, *Black English* (New York, 1972), which provides an essential starting point, as does Marc Shell, "Babel in America; or, The Politics of Language Diversity in the United States," *Critical Inquiry,* 20 (1993), 103–27. For the earlier continuum and its significance, see Douglas B. Chambers, "'He Is an African but Speaks Plain': Historical Creolization in Eighteenth Century Virginia," in Joseph E. Harris, Alusine Jalloh, and Stephen E. Maizlish, eds., *The African Diaspora* (Arlington, Tex., 1996), 100–33; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 560–80.

Few advertisements depict an inherent threat in the culturally hybrid world that the unfree inhabited, with the telling exception of New York City's standard-bearer for the Church of England, Revered Charles Inglis, who in 1773 blamed the "bad company" frolicking on "the late Holydays"—probably Pinkster and Whitsunday—for the departure of Dick, his "likely, well-made," English- and Dutch-speaking servant; see Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 167.

stolen or led away by others. Owners hoped that slaves and servants could be marked by their very proficiency in language, as in the case of Cato, who, though branded as a boy in Jamaica, "speaks English as if country born," and of twenty-two-year-old George, whose Staten Island master believed that his tendency to "tal[k] a good deal upon the New-England Accent" would make him conspicuous. If George was in fact a spectacle when he spoke Yankee, the Chester County slave who "speaks Swede and Mulatto well" probably had more options. Richard Swan of Philadelphia did succeed in recapturing his stereotypically named Cuffy after describing him in print as "a Creole, born at Montserrat, and speaks good English and French." This slave (or servant—the advertisement, revealingly, does not say) was marked by a scar and plagued by "sore feet." Yet these handicaps did not keep him from running away again, two months later, under the almost comically Anglo-Irish–sounding name of Billy Farrell.[31]

Like fast-talking confidence men, linguistically proficient black slaves and servants made a mockery of many attempts to fix accents on them, or even to define their proficiency or lack thereof. A 1726 advertisement describes a slave who "talks no English or feigns that he cannot." This owner associated the uncertainty of his slave's language skills with the runaway's insistence on "calling himself Popaw," his African name. If they could not use the runaway advertisements to fix dialect, masters did attempt to isolate and control other slave uses of language, like naming. One-quarter of the runaway advertisements Thelma W. Foote examined for her study of blacks in colonial Manhattan mention surnames or aliases, the use of which, she notes, "provides evidence of the multiple layers of identity adopted by runaway slaves." Runaways regularly changed their names, and the advertisements often catalog the known aliases of runaways with a sense of injury and outrage, as masters rightly associated the power of naming with their own privileges as propertyowners: "He always changes his name, and denies his master." This particular slave, an "excellent hammerman" who had run before and who would later be rented out only to run again, was known to his master by the rather generic name of Cuff Dix, but the jailer who advertised him six weeks later noted that he "says his name is *Willis Brown*." When arrested, he carried a bolt of striped linen, which he said he had bought in Salem County, and the jailer who wrote the advertisement associated both the cloth and his acts of speech with his prospective and real transformation into "a preacher, as he says, among the Indians." Likewise, Robbin, a fifteen-year-old belonging to Noah Marsh of Westfield, New Jersey, chose the right nickname in "call[ing] himself Levi alias Leave."[32]

In the master's mind there was some relationship between this insistence on self-naming and Levi's ability to "frame a smooth story from rough mate-

[31] Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 19, 24, 36, 62; Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* xxx, 69, 120; *N.-Y. Weekly Jour.,* Apr. 15, 1734; *Pa. Gaz.,* Sept. 4, 1740, June 4, Aug. 6, 1747.

[32] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 5, 14, 20, 29, 42, 228; Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan," 249; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 40, 41–42, 65, 123–24, 126, 129–-30; *N.-Y. Weekly Jour.,* Aug. 26, 1734, Jan. 19, 1736.

rials." The ability to take or change names seemed of a piece with other feats of speech, skills that masters admired and desired in their slaves and servants even as they posed capital risk. Even though he "stammers in his speech," Robert Freeland's slave would probably "change his name [and be] at no loss for a plausible story." A "Guinea Negroe" accent was no obstacle to Cuff, a Dutchess County slave whose master described him as "very flippant; he is a plausible smooth Tongue Fellow." Mid-Atlantic servants and slaves engaged in a talkative resistance, appropriate to the cooperative, intimate, yet often public nature of their exploited labor. In calling their runaways smooth talkers, some owners tried to capture their mixed feelings about their talking property. More often, they veered between narrating the runaways' daring acts of speech and cursing their slaves for what a later generation of slaveholders would naturalize as a racial propensity to lie, a proof of dishonor.[33]

One man's or woman's lying, of course, was another's resistance to brutal exploitation. The lengthier, more descriptive advertisements often connect the runaways' deceit to their most valuable and human characteristics. The master of Buck, a mulatto, lurched between seemingly contradictory descriptions of his bondsman's linguistic and personal abilities, trying but failing to separate speech abilities and virtue for one who seemed "sensible, artful, and deceptive in conversation, firm and daring in his efforts to perpetrate villainy, though of mild temper, and plausible in speech."[34] Such property, often literate as well as verbally adept, could not be so easily contained within the descriptive logic of the advertisements. Neither the terms of value nor the rhetoric of pretense sufficed. The longer the advertisement—the more there was to say—the more likely that the escapee's own web of words, his or her confidence game, had already undermined the master's security, or confidence, in ownership, much less in visible markers of racial difference.

Runaways changed their clothes and their names and put their verbal and manual skills to work to leave their masters. But what were they passing *for?* The exciting new scholarship on "passing," growing out of an inquiry into race and gender and an archive of mainly nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, generally presumes that slaves and other people of African descent passed for white (and sometimes, while doing so, cross-dressed to pass for men or women).[35] In the mid-Atlantic of the eighteenth century,

[33] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 47, 228; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 74–75. For antebellum southern slaves as dishonorable liars in the white imagination, see Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), 11–12, 40–41.

[34] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 228; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 74–75, 121–22; *Pa. Gaz.,* June 7, 1744, June 1, 1749.

[35] See, for example, Elaine K. Ginsberg, "Introduction: The Politics of Passing," and most of the other fine essays in Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, N.C., 1996), with the exception of Marion Rust, "The Subaltern as Imperialist: Speaking of Olaudah Equiano," 20–36. See also Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York, 1997), 246–84.

however, to be white was not necessarily to be free; to be black was not nec-
essarily to be a slave; and to be a mulatto or racially mixed was not necessar-
ily to be either of these. Slaves and indentured servants instead pretended to
be free, which only occasionally—but not usually, or even primarily—meant
passing for white.[36]

Passing is as much a product of eighteenth-century capitalism as of mis-
cegenation and nineteenth-century racism. Werner Sollors has recently
maintained: "Racial passing is particularly a phenomenon of the nineteenth
and the first half of the twentieth century. It thrived in modern social sys-
tems in which, as a primary condition, social and geographic mobility pre-
vailed." If such mobility also existed in the eighteenth century, and
supported kinds of passing that were not simply, exclusively, or even primar-
ily "racial," much more needs to be explained before the origins and devel-
opment of passing, and thus of race in America, will be understood. The
same demographic and economic conditions that created the self-made men
and the peripatetic footballs of fortune in so many genres of eighteenth-cen-
tury print culture also made it possible for slaves and servants to pass as free
(or as traveling slaves and servants).[37]

Passing depends on distinctly marked categories of identity even as it
contests them, and early America did not lack for ascribed, clearly marked
identities. People were supposed to act according to their station in life, even
if more and more people were coming to believe, with Benjamin Franklin,
that character and talent, rather than birth, should determine that station.[38]
How could eighteenth-century white northerners, with their bias toward
order and their investments in persons (slaves, servants, children, wives) as
property, adapt to the profitable but dangerous mobility that the market
brought? Historians of women and the family have shown us how institu-
tions like coverture institutionalized patriarchy while allowing women and
children to act, quite consequentially, as inheritors and surrogates of men.
Colonists had a related technology for surrogacy on the part of servants and
slaves. It was called the pass, and in its manipulation by the unfree lie the
true origins of passing.

Written passes allowed slaves and servants, unlike the serfs of old, to
move over large areas in the service of their masters' interest. Sent on

[36] Thus Graham Hodges titles his recent collection of New York and New Jersey runaway
advertisements *"Pretends to Be Free."* It is true, nonetheless, that such an option was more avail-
able to mulattoes, but partly because mulattoes were more likely to be native born and skilled,
whether enslaved or not. The history of passing, and of racial mixing generally, needs to be
written with greater attention to regional specificities and change over time.

[37] Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both,* 247–48, citing Louis Wirth and Herbert
Goldhamer, "The Hybrid and the Problem of Miscegenation," in Otto Klineberg, ed.,
Characteristics of the American Negro (New York, 1944), 307.

[38] Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both,* 248. On ascribed yet changing identities in
the colonial period, see Michael Zuckerman, "Identity in British America: Unease in Eden," in
Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800*
(Princeton, N.J., 1987), 115–58; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*
(New York, 1992), pts. 1, 2. For the "moments of ambiguity" in colonial identities, see, espe-
cially, the essays by Greg Dening in Hoffman, Sobel, and Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly,*
1–6, 9–12, 157–62, 343–47 (quotation on 5).

errands, hired out, or told to find casual wage work on their own, city and country slaves found that a pass allowed considerable freedom; they could engage in their own labor and speculation, sometimes earning the money to buy their freedom. Servants were often so mobile that they merely used their indentures (printed forms filled in with names and dates) as passes. The existence of these legal documents, handwritten or printed and filled in, allowed slavery to be an extralocal phenomenon, like trade itself. Slaves who circulated functioned for their owners like reinvested money: they earned more money.

What better way, then, to capitalize on the system than to forge a pass, to make an investment in self on the real or imagined credit of a man of property? One slave woman made a "Note to look for a Master" into a "travelling Pass." Runaways manipulated written documents, writing their own, stealing them, or changing their meaning. Masters recognized as much by using the same language for these bondsmen's acts of creative writing and re-reading that they used for the ubiquitous makers of false paper and coin in the colonies: their work was forgery, "Counterfeit."[39] The picaresque proletariat was at its most cooperative and mixed when white servants forged passes for slaves, the resold kept their old indentures, and the freed held theirs and lent them to friends in need. One New Castle, Delaware, slave, himself twenty-four, kept the "old pass" of his father, "who has travelled over most parts of the continent." A master, who perhaps had been duped before, asked reward seekers to remember to look for the forged pass when taking up his two mulattoes and further sweetened the pot by offering an extra two dollars for just the pass itself. Others tried to identify the spurious pass by naming the signatures on it. Not a few members of the owning class were several steps behind their property in realizing the power of literacy. One New Jersey man described the revelation wrought when his property vanished: "It is supposed he has got a false pass; he can read the bible very well."[40]

Although it is hard to know how many of the unfree and how many of the runaways were literate, the literacy of some runaways did enable them literally to write their own ticket. One owner was certain that his slave would "pass for a free Negroe, as he can write any Pass he thinks necessary." But slaves did not have to be literate to profit from the trade in passes. Passes written or signed by or in the name of "acquaintences" in Baltimore enabled one Penn, alias James Pemberton, to elude his master in Cecil County for several years between 1770 and 1775. He hired himself to a tanner, then took an indenture to the tanner's relative in Philadelphia, and was recaptured only to run away again. William Murrey, a slave who rejected the

[39] Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 41–42, 44–45; *Connecticut Gazette* (New Haven), Feb. 7, 1756; Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 178. Counterfeiters, in turn, were punished, sometimes with death, for "passing" false coins or bills; see, for example, *N.-Y. Mercury,* Feb. 22, 1762. On counterfeiting as a plebeian practice, see *Pa. Gaz.,* Nov. 21, 1735, "A Caution to the Paper-Money Colonies," June 8, 1738; John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York, 1994), 115–21.

[40] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 3, 71, 95, 103–04, 158, 177, 206; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 53–54, 56, 63, 97–98, 112–13, 119–20, 125, 137, 140.

name Quaco, regularly showed a certificate of baptism around Philadelphia to support his claim to freedom. Some masters themselves colluded in the hoarding of passes: the convenience of old passes and their value as insurance against being kidnapped and resold perhaps explains why John Price allowed Jacob Jones, his mulatto servant, to keep the pass he used three years before during his service in the army as well as another of more recent vintage. With no expiration dates, how was one to know that a pass signed by a Somerset County, New Jersey, justice of the peace was either forged or obtained under false pretenses? Old indentures, on the other hand, did have expiration dates that could be used as proof of freedom. In such instances, slaves could pass as former servants. To have a pass was to take control of a past, whether fictive, real, or a little of both.[41]

In the eighteenth-century mid-Atlantic, one was said to pass false money, to pass for a tradesman, or to pass for free as well as to pass for white, Indian, or mulatto. Where the main markers of identity for men were, not white and black, but rather free versus unfree and genteel versus common, to pretend to be free was as outrageous a pretense, and as potentially subversive, as Tom Bell's traveling up the coast pretending to be a gentleman or Stephen Burroughs's running an amateur mint in rural Massachusetts half a century later. Thus, accounts of runaway exploits filled newspaper columns as regularly as stories of confidence men, counterfeiters, and thieves, while employing an identical rhetoric of pretense and villainy. For the skilled, especially, to run away was "very alarming," especially one "in whom his master has put great confidence, and depended on him to overlook the rest of his slaves, and he had no kind of provocation to go off."[42]

However much they followed their individual interest in employing their slaves and servants abroad, irate owners saw and bewailed the social implications of the runaway as confidence man. In a veritable short story of an advertisement, the printer John Holt implicated his servant, "Charles Roberts, or German," in a Gotham crime wave that had been blamed on black chimney sweeps just weeks earlier.

> Deceived by his seeming Reformation, I placed some Confidence in him, which he has villainously abused; having embezzled Money sent by him to pay for Goods, borrowed Money, and taken up Goods in my Name unknown to me, and also on his own Account, pretending to be a Freeman. By this villainous Proceeding I suppose he has collected a considerable Sum of Money, and am also apprehensive that he has been an Accomplice in some of the late Robberies committed in and near this City. Whoever will take up the said Servant, and bring him to me, or secure him in some of His Majesty's Goals, so that I may get him again, if taken up in the City of New-York, shall have Five Pounds Reward, and a greater, if taken up at a greater Distance. Any Persons who take him up, are

[41] Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves*, 69, 72, 88–89, 92–93.
[42] Ibid., 37, 69, 93; *Pa. Gaz.*, July 2, 1752.

desired to be careful to carry him before the next Magistrate, and have him well searched, leaving all the Money and Goods found upon him, except the necessary Clothes he has on, in the Hands of the said Magistrate; and to be very watchful against an Escape, or being deceived by him, for he is one of the most artful of Villains.

Against some documents that Roberts presented as proof of his freedom, which Holt pronounced "the most specious Forgeries," the printer appealed to the local authorities and the public, spreading in print his version of Roberts's story: the rogue's near escape from the gallows years before in New Haven through a legal technicality, the new master (Holt) and his repeated kindnesses, and the judge's sentence that had turned this short-term servant, once convicted of a crime, into a long-term, profitably laboring convict, "my Servant for 40 Years, as the Records of the Superior Court at New Haven will Witness."[43]

Roberts's game, his transgression of Holt's "confidence," went to the heart of not only the self-fashioning of blacks, mulattoes, and the unfree but also to that of free whites. It also provides a vivid example of how resistance was translated by whites into an excuse for still more exploitation. The law, and its imperial and local systems of incarceration, was on the side of the masters; strangers of the wrong look, dialect, or color were regularly committed to jail and then sold "for the charges"—yet another example of the profit, in cash as well as unpaid work, being wrung from the picaresque unfree at every turn.[44] But when law was not enough to preserve confidence in slavery and servitude, and in the white men who profited most from them, there were always the advertisements themselves.

For there was another side to the Charles Roberts story, involving John Holt's checkered past, his peripatetic existence, and his questionable financial dealings. The story illuminates Charles Roberts's "artful" schemes, his flight, and his public contestation of Holt's ownership. It also may help flesh out the full meaning of the runaway advertisements, which need to be addressed in terms of their printedness as well as their clues about the lives of particular masters and slaves. A close analysis of Holt's early slave narrative in light of other sources restores the complexity of what happened, again and again, between runaways, masters, and the reading (which is to say, consuming) public. It is not Charles Roberts's story. It is John Holt's story, but it can be told in a way he chose not to tell it—perhaps something like the way Charles Roberts told it on the streets of New York.

[43] Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 54; Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 91–92. For the fingering of chimney sweeps, see *N.-Y. Mercury,* Mar. 29, 1762; *New-York Gazette: or, the Weekly Post-Boy,* Apr. 1, 1762.

[44] Hill, *Liberty against the Law;* Linebaugh, *The London Hanged.* The new idea of reforming criminals through public penal labor applied, insofar as it had been formulated, to freemen, not property, and only developed as bound labor declined during the Revolutionary era; see Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760–1835* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996), 78–85. As slavery disappeared, free blacks came to populate the penitentiaries in disproportionate numbers; see Adam Jay Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 77.

A Virginia native and former mayor of Williamsburg, Holt had landed an appointment as postmaster in New Haven, where in 1754 he and James Parker started the *Connecticut Gazette*, that colony's first newspaper. In June 1757, £240 worth of lottery tickets were stolen from his office, along with "a considerable Sum of money." Since lotteries could occur only when approved by the state legislature, the robbery was a capital crime in more than one sense of the word.[45] Holt accused his servant—Charles Roberts— of the theft. But the family of Humphrey Avery, New Yorkers who legally owned the tickets because their land (Fisher's Island) was the prize in the lottery, did not believe that Roberts had acted alone. Suspecting that Holt had framed Roberts, or put him up to it and profited from the scam, they refused to prosecute the servant. So Holt prosecuted for his own benefit and in winning had Roberts's term extended from its remaining three years to forty—that is, a lifetime. The value of the missing tickets, if Holt had had his way, would have bound Roberts for life.

Holt took Roberts with him when he moved to New York City. By the spring of 1762, when he ran away, Roberts would have been free by the terms of his original indenture. Why would Holt want to hang on to a servant who, he later maintained, had repeatedly shown himself to be a "villain"? Why did Holt place what he called confidence in Roberts? A brief filed with a New York court by the Averys provides some clues. In his own brief, as referred to by Samuel Avery, Holt maintained that Roberts's labor was worth little. But Avery gathered impressive testimony that Roberts was the backbone of Holt's newspaper operation: he "worked at the press, wrote on the papers etc." Holt's former partner and employees maintained that Roberts's labor was worth eighty pounds a year; one said he would have been glad to have Roberts as a partner. Moreover, shortly before the lottery theft Roberts had tried to buy his own freedom with money he had earned fiddling, only to have Holt ask two hundred pounds for Roberts's three remaining years of service. Other witnesses held that Roberts had never wronged Holt before his alleged theft of the tickets: a direct contradiction of Holt's testimony in the New Haven court and in print when Roberts ran five years later. Roberts certainly had motive to steal from Holt and to run away, but Holt had motive to implicate Roberts in crime.[46]

The problem of the "amasing confidence" that Avery saw Holt place in Roberts, and that Holt admitted to in his advertisement of 1762, was resolved by Holt in his published portrait of the servant as a villainous confidence man. For it was not only Roberts's status but Holt's own that was tied up in this struggle, and not only in the sense of Roberts's very valuable

[45] Layton Barnes Murphy, "John Holt, Patriot Printer and Publisher" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1965), 2–10; *N.-Y. Gaz.: or, the Weekly Post-Boy,* June 27, 1757; Beverly McAnear, "James Parker versus John Holt," New Jersey Historical Society, *Proceedings,* LIX (Edison, N.J., 1941), 77–78; V. H. Paltsits, "John Holt," *Dictionary of American Biography,* vol. 9 (New York, 1932), 181; John Samuel Ezell, *Fortune's Merry Wheel: The Lottery in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), chaps. 1–2.

[46] *Avery v. Holt,* Brief, [1772], Samuel Avery Papers, New York Public Library. The Averys were still trying to recover the value of the missing tickets 12 years later.

unpaid labor. By the time he moved to New York in 1760, Holt had acquired a reputation as a debtor, a drunk, and a liar in some quarters. In New Haven, he had taken money from the postmaster's fund and the printing business to buy a house, and he never paid his debts there after going to New York, presumably with Roberts, to run James Parker's newspaper. In April 1762—at the very moment that Roberts ran away—Parker was desperately trying to get a settlement out of Holt and to end their partnership, which he did upon a promise of getting more cash, most of which Holt never remitted. By the mid-1760s, Parker and others were describing Holt in the same terms—"Smooth tongued," a "deceitful knave and Villain"—that Holt had used to describe Roberts.[47]

Knowing what Roberts and some of his contemporaries knew, then, we are in a better position to read Holt's advertisements for Roberts. Holt published his first notice on April 15 in what was about to become his paper, *New-York Gazette: or, the Weekly Post-Boy*. It reads at first as a public, legal warning: "Whereas my servant *Charles Roberts,* alias German, a Mulatto, has villainously abused the Liberty I allowed, and the trust I placed in him . . ." Holt wastes no time in labeling Roberts a villain, proceeding to refer to public whippings Roberts had received in the past and "the narrow Escapes he has had from the Gallows." He then describes Roberts's multiple purchases on Holt's behalf and on his own, "pretending to be a Free Man." But Roberts, who had other sources of cash such as fiddling, was legally permitted to make his own purchases. Without mentioning specific malfeasances, Holt deflates the value of Roberts's tales, of his self-fashioning, by decrying his "plausible Pretences" as "absolute Falsities." He warns all readers "not to have any Dealings with the said servant, not to trust, harbour, or entertain him on my Account whatever without a Note from me." Only then does he declare Roberts a runaway confidence man: "Excessively complaisant, [he] speaks good English, smoothly and plausibly, and generally with a Smile, is extremely artful and ready at inventing a specious Pretence to conceal a Villainous Action or Design." Perhaps sensing that he had made Roberts too impressive, he limits his praise where it might touch on his exploitation of Roberts's talents: "He . . . can read and write tolerably, and understand a little of Arithmetick and Accounts."[48]

Holt placed a similar advertisement in the other two New York papers that week. But it did not keep Roberts from circulating or gaining allies, so Holt responded two days later with an even longer advertisement that denied

[47] James Parker to John Holt, various dates, New-York Historical Society; McAnear, "James Parker versus John Holt," 82–95, 198–212; *Avery v. Holt,* Brief, Avery Papers; Benjamin Franklin to Jared Ingersoll, Dec. 19, 1763, Parker to Franklin, Oct. 27, 1764, Parker to Franklin, June 6, 1766, in Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* 33 vols. to date (New Haven, Conn., 1959–), 10:402–03, 11:416, 13:302–05; Parker to Ingersoll, Apr. 6, 1767, Papers Related to James Parker, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; Parker to Ingersoll, Oct. 11, 1767, Ingersoll Papers, New Haven Colony Historical Society; Alan Dyer, *A Biography of James Parker, Colonial Printer* (Troy, N.Y., 1982), xi, 58–59, 69–70, 80, 95–110, 171 n. 30.

[48] *N.-Y. Gaz.: or, the Weekly Post-Boy,* Apr. 15, 1762.

Roberts's story about being free. This notice goes even further in trying to fit Roberts into the twin stereotypes of the black slave and the confidence man. Charles "effects to dress very neat and genteel," yet his self-presentation is "obsequious, and insinuating"; he not only smiles but speaks "with a cringe." Holt himself appears as the virtuous, innocent, wronged patriarch, telling how he "took him into my family on trial" even after "he was guilty of various Crimes and Felonies." The lottery ticket affair is not mentioned, and neither is its location, the location of Roberts's labor: the print shop. Roberts is turned into an unskilled domestic, associated with an ambiguously introduced status as a former slave. At great length, Holt seeks to turn "one of the most artful of Villains" back into a slave whose value, in every sense, is denied even as it is most publicly reclaimed.[49]

Print, as Shane White reminds us, was "one of the means of enforcing the slave system." The slave system was also an important means of supporting print culture and the extralocal market that made print so expansive and interesting. The constitutive relation between slavery and print culture was reciprocal.[50] When Samuel Keimer started the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1728, he offered each subscriber a free advertisement every six months. The first three advertisements to appear in the paper were for land, for a runaway servant, and a Negro man: "Enquire of the Printer." Is it too much to say that Benjamin Franklin's first wages in "the best poor man's country" came directly from the cash generated by these advertisements? Certainly, Franklin himself, as the rising proprietor of the paper, lost few chances to offer laborers and other goods for sale throughout the 1730s and 1740s. Carrying advertisements for runaway horses, servants, and slaves, acting as agent in the sale and recovery of such properties, Franklin and other printers were in the business of expanding the marketplace and keeping property with and without legs secure, yet fungible. One New Yorker even kept a registry of slaves for sale and advertised its availability in the newspaper.[51]

An examination of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reveals that runaway and sale notices constituted a significant number of the advertisements in these papers (see Table I). Printers also produced broadside runaway advertise-

[49] *N.-Y. Gaz. [Weyman's],* Apr. 19, 1762; *N.-Y. Mercury,* Apr. 19, 26, May 3, 10, 1762; *N.-Y. Gaz.: or, the Weekly Post-Boy,* Apr. 29, 1762. Holt moved his advertisement to the front page of his paper on May 6; he had already made sure it would appear several times in all the New York papers as well as in the *Pennsylvania Gazette.*

[50] White, *Somewhat More Independent,* 119. It is helpful here to recall that the cultural system epitomized by print and energized with republican ideology has also been called "print-capitalism" and placed in the context of the revolt of the colonies, and the invention of nationalism, in the 18th century; see Warner, *Letters of the Republic;* Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism,* rev. ed. (New York, 1991), 37–65. For the formulation of a "reciprocal determination . . . between a medium and its politics," see Warner, *Letters of the Republic,* xii.

[51] *Pa. Gaz.,* Oct. 1, Nov. 2, 1728, Dec. 23, 1729, May 11, 1732, May 3, 1733, May 23, 1734, reprinted in Labaree et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* 1:272, 345, 378; *Pa. Gaz.,* Nov. 27, 1732, Apr. 26, Sept. 7, 1733, May 30, 1734, July 31, 1735, Oct. 7, 1736, Mar. 7, 1740, Apr. 3, 1741, Aug. 21, 1744, Sept. 4, 1746, Aug. 4, 1748, Jan. 3, 10, 17, 1749; McManus, *Black Bondage in the North,* 24–25.

ments, few of which survive today but that were, like other job printing, a significant source of income.[52] But the direct profit motive was only the most obvious way in which printers and print depended on unfree labor because so much of the commerce transacted through the newspaper derived from its fruits.

Owners expressed this common sense by relying more and more on print to recoup their losses. Increasingly, by the 1760s, jailers and owners communicated across large distances through print in their efforts to rein in runaways. Virginia masters placed advertisements in New York papers; Connecticut masters wrote to the *Pennsylvania Gazette.* Printers built an extralocal network of slave purchase, sale, and capture; jailers placed notices asking masters to pick up their fugitives and pay charges. Buying space in one or more papers and having them run for weeks, masters used advertisements as public, legal warnings not to aid their fugitives, threatening prosecution to "Masters of vessels" and other would-be employers. The more slaves resorted to writing passes and to sophisticated uses of the English language, the more masters used print to make up for it, lambasting the "evil designing persons" who wrote passes and harbored fugitives, warning the public about smooth-tongued runaways. A particular community was being constructed when John Lloyd of Stamford, Connecticut, asked "any Gentlemen" reading the *Pennsylvania Gazette* to "be so kind, when they have read their Papers, to cut out the Advertisement, and set it up in the most publick Place, it will be esteemed a Favour." During the upheavals of 1776, when more and more slaves were running away, more than one master expressed hope that "loyal whigs" would help recapture his slaves. One of these masters, Hugh Whiteford of Harford County, neglected to place an advertisement in the New York paper, and his mulatto slave was released from jail there in July 1776. Realizing that in the midst of the Revolution it was easier to imagine transcending time than space, he asked that "this advertisement may be carefully kept and taken notice of for several years."[53]

On the more local level, printers and postmasters like Franklin, Holt, and Hugh Gaine served as agents for masters. They were go-betweens, informing masters of the whereabouts of their captured slaves and servants. Naming names, they also preserved anonymity when it was desired by propertyowners. Local slaves were put on the market with advertisements in the paper to "enquire of the printers hereof." Unnamed, the slave would be less

[52] Charles E. Clark and Charles Wetherell, "The Measure of Maturity: *The Pennsylvania Gazette,* 1728–1765," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., 46 (1989), 289–91; Lawrence C. Wroth, *The Colonial Printer* (New York, 1931), 213. Clark and Wetherell find that 22.1% of the advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* concern labor, and 31.5% during Franklin's tenure as editor (299). By contrast, in an English provincial newspaper, "notices of fugitives, wives, prisoners and soldiers almost never make up more than 1 per cent" of the advertisements; see C. Y. Ferdinand, "Selling It to the Provinces: News and Commerce Round Eighteenth-Century Salisbury," in Brewer and Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods,* 399. At a time when the *Pennsylvania Gazette* cost 10 shillings per year, an advertisement cost 5 shillings; see *Pa. Gaz.,* June 3, 1731, Oct. 26, 1732.

[53] Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 224, 285; *Pa. Gaz.,* Jan. 7, June 5, 1746; Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 53, 106, 131.

likely to learn of his or her impending sale and try to affect its outcome. Printers who spread knowledge among the owning class tried to keep knowledge from the owned. Their success in doing so was great and, nonetheless, limited. Slaves and black servants like Charles Roberts worked in print shops, and many were literate. Owners were often quite aware that slaves had access to whatever they placed in the paper. Some masters even used the advertisements to ask their prodigal property to return. And a few slaves and servants took out notices themselves, challenging their owners directly, as Charles Roberts might have if John Holt had not owned the newspaper as well as Roberts's labor. In the spring of 1747, Venture Smith, a Long Island fugitive slave, took an advertisement out on a white servant who had run away with him and then stolen his money. At the time, Smith, the white servant, and two fellow travelers were also the subject of an advertisement. The system stayed one step ahead: a large step, but one that some runaways managed to leap.[54]

The promise of print, especially for white men, was the promise of profitable disembodiment and impersonality, an exciting new aspect of existence that would improve upon the embodied and personal spaces of social interaction in everyday life, where value was, not really in the eye of the rational beholder, but in the clothes, the trade (or lack thereof), in the already-determined status of the physical person. Yet some white men used print to reenslave blacks who had run away by disguising their bodies. The advertisements reembody the runaways, turning picaresque *luftmenschen* back into salable commodities.[55] Allowing for remarkable acts of self-fashioning and cruel maneuvers of reenslavement, the workings of print epitomized an unfree labor system that depended on the very movement, linguistic skill, and improvisation it sought to contain.

Both masters and slaves appreciated the possibilities and dangers presented by print culture, and the market that print mediated, for black self-fashioning and the institutions of unfree labor. Print was undeniably a

[54] Smith and Wojtowicz, eds., *Blacks Who Stole Themselves,* 146–47; *N.-Y. Gaz.: or, the Weekly Post-Boy,* Jan. 7, 14, 1754; *Md. Gaz.,* Dec. 27, 1749; *Pennsylvania Journal,* June 12, 1760; *N.-Y. Mercury,* Sept. 5, 1757; *New-York Gazette; and the Weekly Mercury,* Feb. 1, 1768; [Venture Smith], *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa . . .* (New London, Conn., 1798), reprinted in Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Ky., 1996), 377. The advertisement for Venture appears in Hodges and Brown, eds., *"Pretends to Be Free,"* 49–50.

In 1780, a New Jersey slave contested his master's ownership in a series of advertisements that appealed to the public on the basis of his master's bad character; for an analysis, see White, *Somewhat More Independent,* 117–19.

[55] Graham Hodges suggested the term *luftmenschen,* a word that in the Yiddish context signifies men who literally live on air, unencumbered by the things of this world—such as the marketplace. On embodied and disembodied identities in print and other media, see Warner, *Letters of the Republic,* esp. 38–42; Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* 377–401; and Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C., 1997).

collective possession of the master class, but at midcentury some people of color were eluding its grasp. Like other possessions, it could be stolen and appropriated; it could be simultaneously oppressive for most and liberating for some.[56] Perhaps owners could have created a truly dependable intercolonial network of slave and servant catching through print if it had been in the interest of enough citizens to do so; if the nascent intercolonial networking that print was making possible had not found other work to do, like fighting wars, developing a republican resistance to taxes, inventing the American nation; if fewer slaves and servants had been literate; or if slavery and servitude had not developed into the highly mobile and flexible labor system that made both so profitable in the first place.

If lawyers were the shock troops of capitalism in the nineteenth century, then surely printers were some of its advance scouts in the century before. Extending the metaphor, consider slaves and servants as the ordinary foot soldiers, who were simultaneously fighting their own private wars.[57] Consider further that Holt, Franklin, and other printers did yeoman service in the American Revolution and that runaways like Roberts served on both sides. The intertwined histories of printers and unfree laborers is apt demonstration not only of the interdependence of politics and culture but also of racial politics and the rest of politics in early U.S. history— North as well as South.[58]

Without an understanding of the mixed-labor systems of the eighteenth-century mid-Atlantic, and the mixed-race, ambiguously identified people who did so much of the work, neither slavery, nor print culture, nor the mid-Atlantic itself can gain their proper place in the larger story of late-colonial American history. These first slave narratives reveal that there is much more to the story of slavery and antislavery than rise and decline, acceptance and resistance, or South and North. The stories told by the mid-Atlantic runaway advertisements are, not of the decline of slavery, but rather of its North Americanization. To read these runaways is to come face to face with the modernity of slavery and servitude at its crossroads on the eve of the Revolution, for every characteristic that has been ascribed to the American self-made man, and cited as evidence of his lack of deference and unfreedom, can be seen in the likes of the exploited Charles Roberts.[59] And yet every attribute of the eighteenth-century confidence man—or run-

[56] By contrast, Jill Lepore stresses the "fatal" consequences of literacy for New England natives in *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998), 26–47.

[57] The role of war in the history of servitude deserves more than metaphoric treatment; see John M. Murrin, "In the Land of the Free and the Home of the Slave, Maybe There Was Even Room for Deference," *JAH,* 85 (1998–1999), 87.

[58] For similar perspectives on the Revolution in Virginia, and U.S. history generally, see Woody Holton, "'Rebel against Rebel': Enslaved Virginians and the Coming of the American Revolution," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography,* 105 (1997), 157–92; Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York, 1997).

[59] See, for example, Zuckerman, "Tocqueville, Turner, and Turds."

away—can be seen in the master and patriot John Holt, and most of all in his dealings with Roberts. That the writers of the advertisements, many of them middling farmers and artisans, were seeking to recapture their property in people suggests that the American free man's narrative—like John Holt's biography and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*—may also require another reading.